Her name in Hebrew is Miriam.
She grows up in a small rural village in the north of Israel. Everyone in this village knows everyone else, and everyone knows everyone else’s business.
Miriam is young, a teenager, and she becomes pregnant. She is not married when she becomes pregnant.
This is a big deal on a lot of levels. In her village, being pregnant outside of marriage is a scandal, bringing shame on her parents.
Making matters worse – far worse – Miriam is betrothed to someone, and that someone is not the father of the baby inside her.
Miriam’s pregnancy therefore comes with considerable personal risk beyond the usual health risks of pregnancy. She could be executed for this scandal.
Miriam soon flees the piercing eyes of her village to the protection of her older cousin, Elisheba, who is wife of a Temple priest, Zechariah. As his wife, Elisheba enjoys a certain privilege.
Yet to hide the pregnant Miriam must have come with significant personal risk for Elisheba.
But she greets Miriam with joy and tells her that great things will soon come with this baby inside Miriam.
We know Elisheba as Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and we know Miriam as Mary, the mother of Jesus.
Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, is the Sunday we hear their courageous story, and the Sunday set aside to especially remember and honor Mary.
What do we know of this very young Jewish teenager who risks everything to give birth to Jesus?
Not much, but just enough.
The Greek of the New Testament uses the word παρθανός (parthanos) to describe her, which we translate as “virgin” in English; but the word also means “young girl” or “unwed maiden.”
The word has everything to do with Mary’s age and marital status, not just her biology.
We know this too: Mary is betrothed to Yosef, or Joseph, a Jewish man probably quite a bit older than she.
Almost certainly this is an arranged marriage. He probably has never met Mary until the day of their marriage. Mary likely outlived Joseph, for we hear little else about him soon after Jesus’s childhood. But here is what we know about Joseph:

In the Gospel of Matthew, an angel tells Joseph about Mary’s pregnancy. He has no idea who the father is – the angel doesn’t tell him. All he knows is the maiden he is about to marry is pregnant, and not by him.

The law of the time held that Joseph, if he wished, could have had Mary stoned to death for what was an obvious tarnishing of his honor. He could have dispatched her just like this, and no one would have thought it wrong.

It is a great act of faith and courage on the part of Joseph that he weds Mary, and takes her child as his own.

It is to the Gospel of Luke where we must turn to learn what we can of Mary.

In Luke, we hear that an angel comes to Mary in a dream, and tells her she is with child, and that God is dwelling in this child within her. Mary must be terrified. This is a lot to put on someone so young. Yet she trusts all will be well even when reason is screaming otherwise. And so she sings her praise to God.

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Unfortunately, we inadvertently cut from her song the printed program today. But please take special note of the rest of the words of Mary’s song, known as the Magnificat, for her words are bold, especially for a Jewish peasant woman of her time:

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things.”

This is not the meek and mild Mary of our Christmas carols. This is the Mary who inspires the poor and persecuted, and the Mary who will be defiant at the foot of the Cross when her son is brutally executed by the Romans.

Her song still rings through the ages, bringing hope to the poor and persecuted.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor executed by the Nazis, once called Mary’s song “the most passionate, the wildest, one might say, the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”

After Mary sings, and lives with Elizabeth for a time, she returns to Joseph shortly before she is to give birth to Jesus. Mary and Joseph go to
Bethlehem to be registered for a census because that is Joseph’s hometown. Maybe they went there for a census, but historians have had difficulty finding any records of a census done that way at that time. Almost certainly they were fleeing from the judgment of Mary’s relatives.

She will give birth in a stable, and the rest of the story will unfold for us as we enter Christmas. You need to come to church tomorrow night to hear it!

There is another side to the Mary story, though, and to hear it we need to fast-forward into the fourth century, to that Nicene Creed that we recite week after week, sometimes with difficulty.

The church fathers – and only men ruled the church in those days – knew there was something miraculous about the birth of Jesus, as indeed there is.

But they struggled mightily with the idea that Jesus was both God and human at the same time.

To be God, they reasoned, Jesus must be pure, he must be without sin, and by the fourth century sinfulness was becoming equated with sexuality and the human body, which they thought of as evil and dirty.

For Jesus to be without sin, they reasoned, he must have been born outside of sexual relations. The focus on Mary as a pure “virgin” came into high relief.

The ancient Church rendered Mary into a perpetual virgin. Maybe all of this happened just this way. But what is so unfortunate is how the human body came to be seen as a sinful vessel.

In so doing, the Church began to lose sight of not only Jesus’s humanity, but Mary’s humanity and her act of discipleship toward the child she bore.

The gospels note, by the way, that Mary had other children after Jesus.

The real miracle of Jesus’ birth is that God chose to walk among us as a human being.

“Love came down at Christmas,” wrote poet Christina Rossetti wrote in 1885.

“Love came down at Christmas.”

That is the real miracle of Christmas.

By so doing, God shows us that the human body is good, that our creation is divine, and our deepest, most intimate and loving relationships are sacred gifts not to be abused or ashamed of, but to be cherished and honored.
Yes, indeed, a long, long time ago, a miracle happened: An angel came to Mary and told her she would be with child, and this child would change the world. She sang God’s praises and all of it came to pass.

Not all of life can be understood by our intellect. Not everything lends itself to neat equations and philosophical categories and creeds.

Sometimes a poem or painting – or a song – is more powerful than a dense theological treatise.

The holy can come when we least expect it, the holy can come in the quiet of the night in a dream, or in an image of a young mother and a newborn infant.

And so, I bring you back to Mary, the Blessed Maiden Miriam, who rejoices at hearing she will have her child, Jesus.

She is brave and smart and strong. Nothing stops her. Nothing.

She is with Jesus every step of the way, even to the Cross, and beyond the Cross.

Mary is truly the first Christian, and she still has much to teach us about how to say “yes” when the world shouts “no.”

An she still shows us how to face tremendous challenges with strength, courage and even joy.

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” Amen